

January 2020 Worship Theme *Solace:*
The Practice of Tenderness

When despair grows in me...I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty
on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not
tax their lives with forethought of grief. -Wendell Berry

The concept of solace is predicated on the existence of sadness and distress, as solace, in noun or verb form, is to provide comfort in challenging times. It's popular cousin, *to console*, also derives from their common Latin ancestor *solari*, "to comfort".

Tenderness, similarly, implies gentle care, the pre-existence of injury or hurt, and a soft approach through something painful. Tenderness speaks to the physical, the embodiment of our spirits, and the fragility of this body. A tender touch is the gentlest variety, given by lovers and beloved mothers. The best of caregivers touch and nurture tenderly, ministering through minding the body also to the fragile heart and spirit-body within. Being tender means one is easily hurt, living with a soft spot that is prone to injury and requiring care. Some restraint and extra attention may be necessary when one is tender.

Many of us, in our darkest hours, instinctively pull in, seeking comfort in our own rational understanding of what tries us. We ask the "w" questions: What? Why? When will it end? Who did this, and how did I end up here? Rarely do the answers to these questions, if we find them, provide relief from our suffering. When cognition fails, desperation finds us in the hands of the larger world, where tenderness that penetrates the heart may show up through the gifts offered in nature, as birdsong, or morning light on treetops. Solace may come from the unsolicited kindness of strangers, or the unexpected email from a new or old friend; wise words in the form of song or poetry, gifts of understanding and companionship on what feels a solitary journey, land in wounded places in ways that our own contrived comforts sometimes cannot. Humor, whether coming as it often does unexpectedly, or consciously sought, brightens and lightens dark moments; the persistent, consistent loving gaze and nuzzle of our four-legged friends soothes amidst unbearable sorrows.

The Buddha understood that all life is *dukkha*, suffering, that manifests as the slightest

This month's theme was written by Erin Collier and the Worship Associates.

dissatisfaction and the greatest physical pain. We all know this pain. These struggles sometimes overwhelm our highest inclinations and we reflexively seek comfort in “false refuges”: alcohol, food, internet overindulgence, offer us temporary but ultimately insufficient reprieve from distress.

The hurting creature held tenderly by another knows relief, as does the one who tends so gently. In witnessing and being with the struggle, we are tenderized, aware of the commonality of suffering. In so doing, we open to the world, becoming a source of solace to ourselves and others.

Questions for contemplation:

1. How do you practice tenderness, with yourself and others?
2. Where do you find solace? Is this always a reliable source for you?
3. How is solace offered in our church community?
4. When do you feel most tender?
5. Can one find solace alone, or must it be ministered?

Quotations and poetry:

“I am proud only of those days that pass in undivided tenderness.” — Robert Bly, [A Little Book on the Human Shadow](#)

Find solace in touching your deepest wounds. There you will find yourself. There you will find peace. - The Better Man Project

I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles. - Anne Frank

The true way to soften one’s troubles is to solace those of others. - Madame de Maintenon

For more on this month’s theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

The Worship Associates are: Matt Andrus, Jeff Brown, Jen Ryan Brown, Alan Cantor, Erin Collier, Jess Jonas, and Katherine McHugh (chair).

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
-Wendell Berry

Onto a Vast Plain

You are not surprised at the force of the storm—
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.
The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees' blood rose. Now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit:
now it becomes a riddle again
and you again a stranger.
Summer was like your house: you know

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where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.
The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.
Through the empty branches the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky.
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

“We keep looking for a home though each of us is a home. And no matter where we run, we land before each other, thoroughly exposed. This is the purpose of gravity — to wear us down till we realize we are each other. Though we think we’re alone, we all meet here. Though we start out trying to climb over each other, we wind up asking to be held. It just takes some of us longer to land here than others. Once worn of our pretense, it’s hard to tolerate arrogance. Once humbled, it’s hard to withstand a litany of “me”. Once burning off the atmosphere of self-interest, there’s a tenderness that never goes away. This tenderness is the sonar by which we sense the interior of life. This tenderness is the impulse that frees us. For anything is possible when we let the heart be our skin. The point is to feel whatever comes our way, not conclude it out of its aliveness. The unnerving blessing about being alive is that it can change us forever. I keep discovering that everyone is lovable, magnificent, and flawed.”

- Mark Nepo, *Things That Join The Sea And The Sky, Field Notes on Living*

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Saint Francis and the Sow

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Galway Kinnell

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